

Only Connect

A conversation with Dr. Ernest L. Rossi

We did not always think like this. We were not always so blasé about everyday miracles. Before the invention of achromatic lenses in the 1840s, a theory was courageously ventured that a microscopic world of a hidden molecular design lay unseen within the visible material world. From the turn of the 19th century, the rumour of a weave of tiny pieces within all natural things tantalised the popular imagination.

Jeanette Winterson, in her historical fairytale "*The Passion*", captures the portent of this through the eyes of a war weary soldier in Napoleon's ranks. On Christmas Eve of 1804, he stares up into a relentlessly bitter winter sky and declares to himself:

"They say that every snowflake is different. If that were true how could the world go on? How could we ever get off our knees? How could we ever recover from the wonder of it?"

Now, at the beginning of the third millennium, we are attended by a similar *zeitgeist*. Fantasies that once distantly orbited the boundaries of speculative science and philosophy have soared comet-like into the general atmosphere of public interest. In particular, the decoding of the genome has propelled our collective consciousness back to all the elementary questions about nature, nurture and self-actualisation. Some of us, in the more spiritually influenced schools of personal development, can be tempted to avert our minds from the possible significance of these achievements. It is as if we are afraid that such advances in biological discovery could explain away the mysterious dignity of the human matrix.

I sometimes use the snowflake analogy when attempting to teach the deeper structure of that elusive state of Erickson-style naturalistic observation and rapport. Never, *never*, recover from the state of wonder that beholds each human organism as a miracle of natural design! Each and everyone an unrepeatable masterpiece. The miracle is even greater as the organism is active in creating itself, **every person being both the creation and the creator**. Remember this, I implore my students, however great your science and skill, however true the lens that you turn on the structural fabric of your subject, of yourself.

One man who is liberated enough to embrace the recent breakthroughs in biology is Dr. Ernest L. Rossi. Does he need an introduction to the readers of *Rapport*? Author of such ground-breaking classics as "*Mind-Body Therapy*" (with David B. Cheek) and "*The Psychobiology of Mind-Body Healing*"³, Rossi provided the scientific basis and clinical method for not only much of the influence for NLP in Health but also many of the more credible advances in complementary therapy during the 1990s. He is a walking treasury of first hand experiences, having studied directly with Fritz Perls, Franz Alexander and, most famously, Milton H. Erickson. Rossi edited the publication of Erickson's "*Collected Papers*"⁴ and "*Seminars, Workshops and Lectures*"⁵. His forthcoming work "*The Psychobiology of Gene Expression - Neuroscience and Neurogenesis in Therapeutic Hypnosis and the Healing Arts*"⁶ is a neuroscience approach to integrating Erickson, Jung, Gestalt, Classical Analysis, Cognitive Therapy and Behaviourism and an attempt to share the scientifically validated (and validating) common denominator in all of them.

A meeting has been arranged with the Great Man at his spiritual home in Europe, Long Close Farm, near Keswick in Cumbria. This is where Dr. Rossi leads personal growth workshops in England and where he married his wife, Kathryn Rossi, Ph.D. I have heard of his tremendous knack of guarding his own privacy during these visits and how he is possessed of an uncanny ability to avoid all personal conversations.

Better keep it technical, I think to myself as I prepare questions that I hope will hide my lack of scientific training. I attempt to adjust my state for the meeting and at best achieve a sort of hysterical calm... How come my hands are shaking while my normally over-colourful mind feels still and blanked-white as a winter landscape? As I run up the stairs of the rambling farmhouse, intending to make some last second adjustments to the interview area, my down-turned head all but collides with the chest of a man.

I take in the socks, jeans and sweatshirt and I can feel the colour rush to my face as I realise I am standing in front of the world's biggest expert on such telltale ideo-sensory responses. I look up to a quizzical face, aged 68 ("and a half") going on 7 years old. A curly mop of once dark hair frames an exquisitely dancing arrangement of creases and sparkle. It is a smile that reminds me that humility is a natural quality of those I've ever truly admired. "Are you Pamela?"

This is Ernie.

It's hard to get him to talk about himself. First his characteristic fascination in all specimens of humanity is turned on me and for a moment it is as if I were the subject of the interview. I feel I'm about to be Rossi-ed. And you know what? It feels really good. We're sitting close because he says he's getting a bit hard of hearing – it would be dreamy to let all my questions just fall head-first into his kindly interest. But I don't know how much time he will give me, so I manage to pull him back to the subject of his forthcoming book.

"Right on. Let's see if I can make myself comprehensible...it is with this book, I think, finally, that I am becoming Ernie Rossi."

He breathes in on that for a few seconds.

"I'm not just saying that. If you look at the history of my papers you'll see that my very first papers, 1968, '69, were about Growth Therapy and my first book in 1972, *"Dreams and the Growth of Personality"*⁷. You see I had this background that was biology and chemistry. It was only in graduate school that I switched my major into psychology, so I have a very strong integration between the biological and psychosocial sciences. So right back there when I began my therapy work, before I met Erickson, what was most appealing to my natural interests was a psychobiological orientation to growth and transformation.

"I'm also second generation Italian. It's usually the second generation that goes through very important creative transformations. The first generation still believes in the old country. That's *real stuff*, they believe, even if they don't like it. The second generation is in conflict between the old and the new. My father was born in Italy and my mother was born in America so actually I'm half-third generation. It's the third generation's task to integrate and find new unity."

So is this the progression he's making in his work, from these divided cultures and schools, finding the connectedness?

" Absolutely. Yes. Right. You see, I am an integrator. My grandparents didn't get along with each other so one Sunday my parents would take me along to one grandparent, the next Sunday we would go to the other. I'm this little five-year-old kid. And each grandparent would always..."You really like me better than the other grandparent" and I'd stammer uncomfortably "Oh, yeeessss, Grandma". Now I'm 68 and a half. It's taken me this long to know who I am. It was a problem when I was young, for a child, because both grandmothers would try and pull you into their camp, but I gradually developed an expertise for mediating the opposites."

There is no self-pity in this, nor later, when he recounts some of the more violent abuses of his upbringing. We are giggling together like conspirators in a kindergarten prank.

"So that was my earliest task. How do you integrate these opposites? That's what appealed to me so with Carl Jung. That's what appealed to me with Fritz Perls. His technique, from my perspective now is, he was trying to integrate the different sides of the personality, the different voices. Then when I met Erickson, well, he was a genius doing it in other ways. It's not only in my way of working with people but in the different sciences - biology, psychology - so my new book is for me the highest expression of psychobiology. Now I try to tease my colleagues, I call it psychogenomics, or *PsychoSocial Genomics* when I really want to tease, because psychosocial scientists and therapists tend to think that their field is very different – the opposite of biology. So I tease by putting the opposites together, "You know, most of our psychosocial processes are the result of interactions between gene expression and environment." So in my new book for the first time I'm integrating all my personal and professional backgrounds."

He's certainly talking my language and has hit upon one of my key frustrations in the academic community⁸. "So, when one sees patterns, there is something harmonious in creating a chord of thinking from the different tones?"

"Yes, transcending the different parts of the pattern to see the whole pattern. Many of the schools of psychotherapy are very provincial. All the schools have their own genius. They all have a piece of the elephant that they know very well but the rest of the elephant's so global and vague. It's limited perspectives that are teaching the young the virtue of only this one God or only this one therapy. That is the problem of human development, human creativity, on an individual level as well as the evolution of human culture as a whole."

"Is there ever an order of events? Is it ever that your experience with people, as a therapist, informs your investigation into new research, or have sometimes new research findings also inspired you to further develop new practices with people?"

"Good question." Again he breathes in deeply. I wonder if he is intensifying his inner search for data to inform an evidence-validated response. **"When I was a child, in 3rd or 4th grade, they thought I was mentally retarded, so they put me in a special room for the retarded kids. Actually I wasn't retarded, it was that my parents spoke Italian, you know getting acquainted with American culture, but they put me in this special room where I was supposed to learn to make wooden things, preparing me to make a living, being simple-minded. I joke about it by saying they "indentured" me to a shoe repair man. There I am, 8 or 9 years old, and every day after school instead of going home I got to walk to the shoe repair shop and learn how to repair shoes. Well, that's OK. I'm a sweet amiable kid and I'm learning how to replace the worn out heels of shoes. But you know, after a couple of years it got kind of boring.**

Somehow there was something about me that wasn't pleased with it. It was again a little world that I somehow intuited was too restricted. I was learning everything from the shoe repair man's point of view. It was wonderful in so many ways - I really learned, for example, how important it was to respectfully fix broken or hurt, worn out things - but what happened was I started walking from school to the shoe repair man's shop slower and slower each day. One day, I noticed there was a little local library on my way, so I decided just to walk through because that would take more time before I had to get to the shop. Well, finally one day, I'm walking through the little library and I notice there's a children's section and I linger there. I don't get a book... but finally, one day, I do get a book, with the gentle and sweet encouragement of the wonderful lady librarians that always seemed to smell so fresh and nice. It's a book of fairy tales and then the day comes when I've read all the fairy tale stories, so I venture to look at the books in the next aisle and I see - oh, they're just adult books, I can't understand them. But, but, what's that?... I see on the binding of one book a flash of lightening, an image of lightening. Ohhhh, maybe it's a fairytale book! I pick it up. "Ewecrissary for Young Boys". That was the way I pronounced 'electricity'. So I picked it up. I didn't know what it was about but it was fascinating, with pictures of a boy experimenting with a Tesla coil and sparks. I became *fascinated* with it. It was something *new*.

"Eventually, I spent so much time in the library the shoe repair man was sitting there with his watch. 'Why are you so late? Your work, isn't it going well?' So I've always developed a habit of exploring something new to get out of my boredom. So this is my way of answering your question."

Then he transports me with moving reminiscences of Franz Alexander, the dapper Austrian analyst, Fritz Perls, the "no-fucking-around" activist, and of course Milton Erickson with whom he collaborated for the last eight years of Milton's life. Ernie is a magical storyteller. Each event is rendered into a poignant fable. These stories serve to remind that the sensitive expression of intuitive humanity is the common link between these mentors, and indispensable in the practice of skilled psychotherapy and training of psychotherapists. Whatever the idiosyncrasies of the practitioner or school, he suggests, it is the ability to recognise and connect to the unique intelligence in others that sets apart those with practical genius. His experiences are truly touching, excruciatingly funny and heart-burstingly inspiring, but I sense that he's taking himself out of the limelight again, so I ask:

"Now I know a lot of people will want to ask you what Erickson was like, but I'd also really like to know what is it about *you* that made that special relationship with him? A lot of people were fascinated by Erickson. Why do you think *you* were bequeathed the responsibility of editing his papers?"

There's a pause and it is one of those rare occasions when he takes his gaze off me.

"This is kind of embarrassing. Some of these things I've never told publicly before. He was very un-boring, fascinating, to me, because I saw he was doing stuff that I had a tendency toward but I didn't know quite how he was doing it. Erickson was a highly controversial figure, his methods were so innovative, such bold approaches. I listened very humbly. I'd come back with my write-ups of taped sessions and I was very eager to learn. That's why I made such detailed indexes when I came to collecting his works together. There were things I didn't understand so I wanted to be able to find them one day when I could go back, one day when hopefully I'd be more able to understand. Now there is a certain tradition in the academic world that

if you're a smartass, if you're a critic and you know how to tear somebody's work apart then that's a sign of how intelligent you are. Erickson was used to that but I was never that. Everyone was tearing him apart at that time, like *"Well what do you say to the countertransference in that?!"* I didn't do that cheap criticism stuff."

"So again, it was the learner in you."

"It was the learner in me. If I have any gift, I have a great intuitive sense of when there's more smarts out there than I have. This is the essence of my therapeutic approach now - I always go for the 'gusto' on meeting, the very first session, the very first contact. What the gusto for me is "where is this person's intelligence?". To use a word, where is the *numinosum* for this person? Rudolph Otto's definition⁹ of *numinosum*, what's fascinating, what's mysterious, what's tremendous! And that's my theory now.

"The new neuroscience research talks about three factors that facilitate brain growth: Novelty, environmental enrichment and physical exercise. All three of these together can optimise gene expression and neurogenesis (growth of new brain cells). I expand that - not only are stem cells in the brain being signalled, differentiated, and matured into newly functioning neurons by novel, *numinous*, exciting experiences but – I hypothesize that the same process is the essence of mindbody healing by psychosocial signals activating stem cells in tissues throughout the body.

Most therapists at the present time, of course, are not aware of how they are facilitating this mindbody healing process – it is still a more or less accidental process. We do not yet have systematic research in mindbody medicine that gives us reliable protocols of how to use psychogenomic processes to turn on gene expression to generate the proteins that give rise to the neurotransmitters, hormones, growth factors and so forth, that are converting those reserve embryonic stem cells in the body into newly functioning tissues - what we call "healing."

Was it Virginia Satir who said we grow people¹⁰? This is not a metaphor. Literally, what's fascinating, interesting, *numinous* for you on a psychological level actually evokes cascades of molecular genomic processes that facilitate the construction and reconstruction of the brain as well as healing throughout the body.

That's what the new book is about; All the ways we can use cultural, artistic, dramatic and humanistic processes to build a better brain during creative moments in everyday life. It's no longer "Art just for art's sake." Its art for the sake of building a better brain and facilitating healing on all levels from the psychosocial and cultural to the molecular genetic. And it's a different and entirely creative experience for every body. From this perspective this is the essential meaning of what creativity is all about! This is the psychogenomic foundation of psychotherapy that I try to develop in my new book."

I've become that kid, back in that library, eyeing up the next aisle of books, and as Ernie leans even closer I am struck by an image of lightening.

"Do you know what a single nucleotide polymorphism is?"

No. But I want to. Ernie takes me through a journey to understand the structure of my DNA and my biological birthright to be the co-creator of my unique being, the essence of individuality from the psychogenomic perspective.

At least... I think that's where he took me. At the time it seemed very simple and strangely, familiarly, *true*.

"Psychogenomic facts are congruent with the infinite diversity we see in human experience. Now the important thing is to recognise that this is not classical genetics from the point of view of the distribution of traits from one generation to the other. This is not Mendel or Darwin. This is not evolutionary psychology or socio-biology that you read about so much today. As I see it, PsychoSocial Genomics is currently evolving from many areas of biological research in functional genomics without any awareness of its potential applications to psychotherapy. There's never been a science like this. *This connection and interaction between the apparent opposites* – biology and psychology - can you see it from the dynamics of my interactions with my grandmothers? As I pursue my apparently abstract academic struggle to develop this new science of psychosocial genomics, I am actually reconstructing my brain and personality – building on the foundations of my earlier creative struggle which was to bring together my two grandmothers.

"You see bits and pieces of psychosocial genomics in the research literature. For example, one biological researcher calls it *behaviour-state related gene expression*¹¹. All psychological states of consciousness from sleep and dreaming to high emotional arousal, joy, depression, anxiety, stress, and trauma are associated with different patterns of gene expression. We create ourselves by engaging in stimulating, numinous, fascinating activities that initiate processes of gene expression that makes the proteins that are the source of new neurones and healing throughout the body. Immediate early genes, for example, are turned on within a minute or two of exciting and deeply meaningful activities. In the research literature this is called "activity dependent gene expression." The entire process that leads to new structural dynamics in the brain and body takes about 90 minutes to two hours. That's the essence of neurogenesis, literally building a better brain. I hypothesise that this is the modern molecular foundation of the ancient dream of the alchemists and mystics. They strived to facilitate 'miracle healing' and mental development via a variety of cultural practices of meditation, prayer, and spiritual endeavours that we see today in the many schools of psychotherapy as well as alternative and complementary medicine.

"This is what we do in psychotherapy. We don't measure the genomic level in psychology yet but eventually we will. The essential function of psychotherapy and all the healing arts as well as the humanities, culture, and creative work in general is to facilitate what's inherently fascinating for individuals and empower them to pursue their own genius, personal development, and healing on all levels from mind to molecule – each in their own individual way!

"The true mentor is some one who helps you recognise your own individuality and helps you go your own way. So in all of my personal stories about Fritz Perls, Franz Alexander, Carl Rogers, and Milton Erickson, exquisitely with Erickson, but equally with the others, you saw it didn't you? My most important encounters with these great teachers, was the creative moment where they understood something that they knew I understood – and I understood how they understood! And, you know, you didn't even have to talk about it. I called it 'creating a shared phenomenological

world in common' in my book *Dreams, Consciousness and Spirit*. That was the magic that gave my intelligence a kick, a boost in confidence. Wow, I would say to myself, if this great person gets it then maybe I'm really not retarded like they thought I was."

We have been conversing, laughing, exploring, connecting, for over two hours and in that time night has fallen. We are now sitting together in the dark and there is a silence. I feel he can see right into me.

"Do you know, Pamela? If you're really interested in what we're talking about right now, it's turning on the zif-268 gene in your brain! What does zif-268 do? It is important in generating a protein that facilitates neurogenesis – new brain growth. If you're really fascinated in what we're talking about, the zif-268 gene is turning on and it's making a growth factor that's facilitating neurogenesis and healing right now as well as in your REM dream states tonight. This conversation is growing both our brains if we're really into something interesting, mutually fascinating and facilitating here together. Dare we say that this is the essence of the best that can be in all human relationships?"

Hey...we're growing brains here!

And I am a snowflake happily melting on the warm heart of Ernie Rossi.

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For a full transcript of the two hour conversation between Ernie Rossi and Pam Gawler-Wright visit www.beeleaf.com and go to "Articles".

For a copy of "The Psychobiology of Gene Expression" (Available in May 2002), send \$38.25 (plus \$4.00 p+p) to W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 800 Keystone Industrial Park, Dunmore, PA 18540-9980 or fax 1-800-458-6515

For details of Ernie's personal growth workshops in England, call Georgina Evers on 017687 72851. Dates for forthcoming events include 1st - 3rd and 4th - 7th October 2002.

NOTES

1. E. M. Forster, *Howards End*, 1926, Arnold
 2. Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*, 1987, Bloomsbury
 3. Ernest L. Rossi and David B. Cheek, *Mind-Body Therapy* 1988 and 1994, Norton
- © Pamela Gawler-Wright

- Ernest L. Rossi *The Psychobiology of Mind-Body Healing* and 1993, Norton
4. Ernest L. Rossi (editor) *The Collected Papers of Milton H. Erickson on Hypnosis*, 1980
 5. Ernest L. Rossi and Margaret O. Ryan (editors) *The Seminars, Workshops and Lectures of Milton. H. Erickson*, 1984-1991
 6. Available May 2002, Norton. See above.
 7. Ernest L. Rossi, *Dreams and the Growth of Personality*, 1972, 1985
 8. P. Gawler-Wright, *Methodological Reductionism and its Place in A New Ontological Connectionism*, 1985
 9. Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923/1950, N. Y.: Oxford University Press.
 10. Virginia Satir, *Peoplemaking*, Science and Behaviour Books, 1972
 11. Marina Bentivoglio, M.D., Institute of Human Anatomy, Borgo Roma, Italy
Gigliola Grassi-Zucconi, Ph.D. Dept. Cell Biology, University of Perugia, Italy.

I hope this article moves you to wish to explore more of Ernie Rossi's work. You can find out more through www.ernestrossi.com